



By **TIM ROSS** and **TOM McTAGUE**

ON THURSDAY, June 8, Theresa May wakes to a cool, overcast Election morning. As she votes, in her 'lucky' leopard-skin kitten heels, May has good reason to feel confident. Her campaign consultants hired at great expense have led her to believe she is on course for a healthy win. The signs from Australian campaign consultants Lynton Crosby and Mark Textor, as well as American pollster Jim Messina, a former adviser to Barack Obama, suggest the Tories will win at least 350 seats – a majority of 50 or more. At 10pm, the results of the official exit poll will be broadcast live on TV. It is a massive piece of research providing a clear and usually accurate guide to the final tally of seats. Anyone working on the project is sworn to the strictest secrecy. By 9.30pm, the final forecast is ready. The polls results are market sensitive. According to BBC insid-

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ers, any deliberate leak could be treated as a criminal offence. 'There's never a leak,' says one. This year, there is a leak. At 9.40pm, Professor John Cur-tice, the academic from the Univer-sity of Strathclyde in charge of the exit poll, is ready to reveal his results. A handful of the most sen-ior journalists and executives from the BBC, Sky and ITV, who com-missioned the research, gather in a room behind the studio where David Dimbleby will make his announcement at 10pm. Back at Tory headquarters, they receive an important phone call. It's Obama. The former US Presi-dent knew someone working on Labour's campaign who told him Corbyn is going to lose 20 or 30 seats – not enough to force Corbyn out. Obama told a Tory friend to pass on an encouraging message: Labour are expecting to lose seats, meaning the Tory majority will go up. And the disastrous Corbyn is here to stay. Earlier, Crosby sent Nick Timoth-y, May's co-chief of staff, a text. 'How you holding up?' 'I feel good, thanks,' Timothy replied. 'What do you reckon?' Crosby's response is positive but contains a note of caution. 'We should do well. My hesitation is any Labour ground effort that we are not picking up the impact of.' All are waiting for the 10pm exit poll. Shortly before, May adviser Fiona Hill's phone buzzes. It is a contact from the BBC, tipping her off about the exit poll results. Hill grabs Timothy and pulls him into a side room off the main floor. 'I've just heard the exit poll – they're predicting a hung parlia-ment,' she says. 'Are you winding me up?' Timothy asks. Who leaked this most sensitive information, breaching the tightest security rules? Shortly before the announcement, one person who calls Hill is Andrew Marr, the BBC politics presenter. He talks to her about the poll pre-

diction and asks for her reaction. But Marr now insists the conver-sation took place only 'seconds' before the official announcement. He believes Hill had already been given the results by somebody else. Were there two leaks from the BBC to the Tories that night? With crucial seconds ticking down to 10pm, Hill hugs a No10 col-league. 'It is all going to be okay,' she says. 'Something's funny with the exit poll, don't worry about it.' As Big Ben strikes 10pm, Theresa May can't watch. Instead, she asks husband Philip to watch for her. She wants to hear whatever the momentous news is to be from him, not from the TV. Philip stands in silence at the home they share in Sonning as the exit poll flashes up on the screen. 'The Conservatives don't have an overall majority,' intones Dimbleby. Philip goes to find his wife. He tells her the news and hugs her. It takes a minute for her to under-stand the scale of the disaster but, when she does, a devastated May breaks down and weeps. Marr comes on screen to discuss the astonishing exit poll numbers. 'Well, the reaction of senior Con-servatives – and I've talked to a few – is that they flatly don't believe it.' Inside CCHQ, it is as if all the air has been sucked out of the room. Timothy winks at a colleague. 'Don't worry about that, it's all fine,' he says. 'Nothing we've seen says anything like it'. Crosby and Messina say the poll could be an epic blunder and Hill does not believe it. May is shocked but remains calm. In the war room, Crosby decides someone has to cheer up the staff for the long night of work ahead. 'F\*\*\* it,' he says. 'The BBC's never been right about anything in their lives.' Boris Johnson has had a burger and a pint of Young's ale and settles down in front a projector screen beaming the BBC News live into his local Uxbridge Conservative Association. 'When the result was announced his reaction was the same as everyone else in the room,

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crushing surprise and astonish-ment,' says one Tory. Johnson knows attention will rap-idly shift to him and his chances of replacing May in No10. 'Ignore your phones. No-one talks to any-one,' he orders his aides. At 11.59pm, Timothy hears the news he has been dreading. The Tories hold on to Swindon North – but with a swing to Labour. 'Oh f\*\*\*,' he says. He chats to strategy direc-tor Chris Wilkins. They wonder aloud whether Britain is hours away from seeing what Prime Minister Boris Johnson would look like. Timothy believes May should con-sider stepping down. He does not want her to suffer the vicious wave of recriminations that will inevita-bly follow. Perhaps for her own good, she should go. He is not alone. Even her husband, Philip, who is distraught for his wife, wonders whether she should resign, according to one member of

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# Toppling THERESA

May's team. A rumour later circu-lated that May did discuss whether she should quit that night. May her-self has denied it. The chairman of the party's influential backbench 1922 Committee Graham Brady texts May, urging her to stay calm. The gist is simple: 'Don't contem-plate doing anything precipitous.' When May returns to CCHQ at 4.30am, she heads straight into a meeting with Messina, election expert Lord Gilbert, Crosby, Textor, Timothy and Hill. May stares at the people who designed her cam-paign, who told her where to go and what to say, and who led her to think it was all working. Gilbert, Crosby and Textor all look pale. Crosby mumbles 'sorry'. Then May expresses her frustra-

tion. 'I just don't understand,' she says. 'You've asked me to go round all these seats, I've gone round these seats. You've told me that the numbers were good and feedback was good – and we've barely won any of them.' She spends 45 minutes locked away in the small VIP room with her team. Chief Whip Gavin Williamson is getting reports of MPs canvassing colleagues for rival leadership bids. Two men are in the frame: Johnson and David Davis. 'I need to speak to DD,' says May. This is critical: not only is Davis the man who pushed for the Elec-tion to be called in the first place, he is also in charge of the Brexit negotiations. He assures May that he is staunchly loyal. Meanwhile, Johnson sends a text



message, express-ing his backing and sympathies. The Foreign Secretary tells May to keep her 'chin up', adding, 'we are with you and behind you'. She is so delighted by the text message that she holds up her phone and shows it to her advisers. Johnson returns to his official residence in London where he sits up watching the rest of the results come in. 'Poor Theresa, poor Theresa,' he mutters to those in the room. 'I hope she is okay.' Back in Downing Street, May decides it is time for some honest conversations. She rings a few senior members of the Cabinet whose support she will need. The Prime Minister is

## Don't grimace at Trump gropes, PM was warned

IT IS A Westminster tradition for Prime Ministers to use the first Sunday back after New Year to outline their vision for the next 12 months in a major, set-piece TV interview. On January 8, 2017, a new show was launching and its presenter was a woman. Sky's Sophie Ridge had bagged the big interview for her first show. During her preparations for the interview, Theresa May's communications director Katie Perrior became concerned that Ridge could pull a stunt. Donald Trump had just supplied the perfect question: what did Mrs May feel about newly unearthed video of the US President-elect saying his celebrity status gave him the ability to grope women whenever he liked, adding that you can 'grab them by the p\*\*\*\*'. As she waited to collect the PM from her Sunday morning church service in Sonning, Berkshire, Perrior knew she would have to find a way to prepare her boss. She decided she would just have to say it. 'Prime Minister, it's possible she will be asked what you think of Donald Trump saying he can grab women by the p\*\*\*\*.' In the front seat of the Government Jaguar, the police



'UNACCEPTABLE': Theresa May and US President Donald Trump

protection officer snorted. Mrs May said: 'Right. How would you like me to respond?' Perrior told her the camera was likely to zoom in on her face in a close-up, because they would be expecting her to grimace in the way she sometimes does. 'I don't do that,' the Prime Minister said. 'You do,' Perrior replied. 'Don't do it. Keep completely and utterly still – poker face. They want to be able to say, "this is the face Theresa May makes when she talks about Donald Trump".' In the end, Mrs May remained perfectly composed, waiting, expressionless, for Ridge to finish her question, before answering: 'I think that's unacceptable.'

## Never mind the voters, she couldn't inspire own team

DURING the Election campaign, Theresa May was not only refusing to take part in televised head-to-head Election debates with Jeremy Corbyn – she was also avoiding her own activists toiling at CCHQ. Advisers Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill were worried about her health, in case she should be struck down by a virus before polling day. 'She didn't come into the office very often because it was basically a pit of germs,' a Tory source says. 'There were quite a lot of germs flying around.' But Mrs May's absence came at a cost to staff morale and Timothy, Hill and Election

experts Lynton Crosby and Lord Gilbert were all told the troops needed their leader. 'After three or four weeks, people are working hard. It's a bit dysfunctional managerially in here, just get her in,' one staffer recalls saying. 'Get her to rally the troops. They haven't heard from her. They are fighting for someone they've never spoken to, they've never seen.' When the Prime Minister did emerge and address the war room, it was hardly the rousing rallying cry the staff required. In the digital age a speaker knows they have lost their audience when they start

checking their phones for interesting items on Twitter. It was all 'too late', according to several staff. One witness described it as simply a repeat of the stump speech everyone in the building had heard her make dozens of times already – not the kind of rousing address that would fire up her weary workers. 'It was all "strong and stable" and the risks of Corbyn's "coalition of chaos"'. I couldn't believe it,' the witness said. 'This was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom talking in the middle of an Election to her own campaign staff and she couldn't even hold the room.'

But instead of bringing harmony, the secret Chequers 'away day' sparked a conflict at the heart of May's Election team, a clash between reforming chief-of-staff Timothy and Crosby, the man she had hired to design her Election campaign. This schism was to prove fatal to her hopes of winning the mandate she craved. Present with Crosby was long-serving Tory election expert Lord Gilbert, who had been central to David Cameron winning an unex-pected majority in 2015. In his Chequers presentation, May's chief speech writer Wilkins set out a radical agenda: overhauling social and industrial policy. 'She had to be the person who always fought for relentless change,'

Wilkins said. May invited her guests to sit down to lunch around the large table in the dining room. Crosby quipped that it was possi-ble to tell a lot about a leader from the menus they serve. Some guests noted the eccentric: chicken lasa-gna, served with boiled potatoes. The logic behind Wilkins and Tim-othy's programme was clear: their approach was working. It had cata-pulted May to a healthy lead over Labour and Corbyn in the polls. But Crosby was unimpressed. The plain-speaking Australian regarded Wilkins's presentation as 'classic populist woolly bullshit'. Grand political theories dreamt up by thinkers in their studies didn't impress him. 'By the way, mate, it's not about being the change candi-

date, it's about doing what people want,' Crosby told the gathering. Wilkins says: 'In the campaign, we basically just screwed the brand completely, hers and the party's. We suddenly became the establish-ment candidate and Corbyn the candidate for change.' Three weeks later, the PM's com-mitment to her Lenten fast would be tested to the full at a meeting with her team. Her senior advisers wanted to talk and their purpose was deadly serious: for the first time, they were formally proposing a snap Election. For the first time, she was ready to listen. One evening after work in the week of March 20, the PM met Timothy, Hill and